

# “DIFFERENT THOUGH THE SEXES ARE, THEY INTERMIX”: GENDER SHIFTS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S *ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY*

“DIFFERENT THOUGH THE SEXES ARE, THEY INTERMIX”:  
OSCILAÇÕES DE GÊNERO EM *ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY*  
DE VIRGINIA WOOLF

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**Abstract:** The following article discusses how gender shifts are portrayed in the novel *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), by Virginia Woolf. Since the beginning of the novel, Orlando is presented as a very talented, unique creature, with a great aptitude for writing. Also, Orlando is depicted as an adaptable person, who shifts his behavior according to what is expected from him in different situations. Besides, Orlando goes through sex change in the middle of the story. Accepting the fantastic happenings of the narrative as real, this work investigates which impact this transformation has in Orlando’s life. Examining the sex change and also the gender shifts the protagonist undergoes through ideas presented by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and by Sandra Bem in the essays “Sex Typing and Androgyny: Further Explorations of the Expressive Domain” and “Sex Role Adaptability: The Consequence of Psychological Androgyny”, this research has identified that Orlando does not restrain themselves to only one gender, but waves through different genders. Thus, adapting themselves to what is required in each situation.

**Keywords:** English Literature; Literary Criticism; Women’s writing; Gender studies.

**Resumo:** O seguinte artigo discute como as mudanças de gênero são representadas na obra *Orlando: uma biografia* (1928), de Virginia Woolf. Orlando é apresentado, desde o início da obra, como um ser criativo e singular, que possui grande aptidão para a escrita. Também é descrito como sendo uma pessoa capaz de ajustar seu comportamento a fim de se adaptar ao que é esperado dele em diferentes situações. Além disso, Orlando passa por uma mudança de sexo no meio da história. Aceitando esse acontecimento fantástico sem maiores questionamentos, a presente pesquisa investiga o impacto dessa transformação na vida de Orlando. Examinando a mudança de sexo e também as mudanças de gênero através das ideias apresentadas por Judith Butler em *Gender Trouble* (1990) e Sandra Bem nos ensaios “Sex Typing and Androgyny: Further Explorations of the Expressive Domain” e “Sex Role Adaptability: The Consequence of Psychological Androgyny”, esta pesquisa identificou que Orlando não se restringe a apenas um único gênero, mas oscila entre diferentes gêneros. Deste modo, adapta-se de acordo com a situação no qual se encontra.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura inglesa; Crítica literária; Escrita feminina; Estudos de gênero

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## The Concept of Gender

Many people still wonder “what is gender, after all?”. In *Gender Trouble*, the American philosopher Judith Butler (1990, p. 10) defines gender as a “shifting and conceptual phenomenon”, that is “culturally constructed” (BUTLER, 1990, p. 6). But, what is gender, exactly? In the patriarchal world, there are only two genders: masculine and feminine. These genders are related to one’s sex. There is man and woman. If one were born a man, his gender would be male. If one were born a woman, then, her gender would be female. In a patriarchal system or society, the man is allowed decision power and several privileges, while women are taught to serve and obey men, since childhood. No other gender is well-accepted by a patriarchal society in order to maintain its structure. In a hypothetical situation where there would be any other genders, the whole system would be disorganized, then putting male privilege at risk. Gender is constructed in order to establish patriarchy. Butler also alerts that “the very notion of “patriarchy” has threatened to become a universalizing concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts.” (BUTLER, 1990, p. 35). As there exist numerous kinds of societies, patriarchy is expressed differently in each of them. The extent of male domination varies from society to society, many times, being related to transcultural traits. Hence, thinking of patriarchy as something that equally affects all societies would be inaccurate.

Butler (1990) exposes misconceptions towards the term “gender”. To her, gender is not binary, it is not intrinsic to sex. For instance, one can be born a man, but not identify himself as male. Sometimes, the subject will neither identify him/herself as female, for gender is non-static, but dynamic. Furthermore, Butler asserts that “if sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders, ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex” (BUTLER, 1990, p.112). The philosopher alerts to the limitations towards gender that are spread in society. She criticizes the fact that social impositions attempt to delimit boundaries to gender. “If gender is not tied to sex, either causally or expressively, then gender is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits imposed by the apparent binary of sex” (BUTLER, 1990, p. 112). If one’s gender is detached to their sex, it could defy pre-established behavior, exploring different some (or many) of its sides. Actually, according to Butler, there is possibly a huge amount of genders, being some of them still unknown and unclassified. There is also the difficulty of explaining gender, for its nature is not fixed, rather it is mutable. Then, more than one gender might diverge in a person, who may shift their gender according to the situation they are living in.

Besides, Butler (1990) sees gender not as a determinant factor of one's identity, but part of it, instead. A person is not merely their gender, but first of all a human being. Thus, the human being should not be conditioned to adopt a behavior that fits the pre-established concepts of male and female, for their identity is not only defined by their sex. In the passage below, Butler exposes the complexity of the issue:

If one is a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered person transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. (BUTLER, 1990, p. 3).

In this point, Woolf's ideas meet Butler's. Woolf believes in the possibility of one's mental detachment concerning their sex, and so seems Butler. Sex does not define who a person is. It does not define a person's talents and abilities. But sex, also as gender (and other factors mentioned by Butler in the extract above), is decisive when it comes to the experiences one has in the world. It is broadly known that men, women and non-binary have different life experiences. Although this is not the only trait that will define them, many other factors interfere and intersect in the circle.

Another aspect Butler criticizes is how the socially constructed "stability of binary sex" (BUTLER, 1990, p. 6) affects the way gender is seen and misunderstood. The philosopher states that "even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two." (p. 6). Thus, the imposed binary character of sex results in the "belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex" (p. 6), where genders would act as mirrors of sex, and would also be restricted by it. This is how the misconceptions of gender are widely spread. On the other hand, when one thinks of gender as detached and independent of sex, gender thus becomes "a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* as easily as a female one" (p. 6). Hence, when one stops thinking of gender as automatically associated to sex, one is finally able to understand that gender is this free-floating artifice that may assume to have different forms and formats. Consequently, one is capable of recognizing that gender may shift and change, for it has a non-static character.

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## Gender in the Character Orlando

Having defined the basis of this research towards the concept of gender, now it is time to discuss how gender and its implications are portrayed in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). The opening sentence of the novel discusses the question of Orlando’s sex: “He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 1). Here Orlando is presented as unquestionably belonging to the male sex. This need to reassure Orlando’s sex in the first sentence of the book is, itself, something to be examined. If Orlando is surely a man, why would there be the urge of highlighting it? To affirm that Orlando, at the beginning of the narrative, is a man is fundamental for the further discussion about their sex because, as time goes by, Orlando gradually frees themselves from social conventions in terms of gender.

Throughout the novel, Orlando is described as an enchanting, charming being, who is able to delight everyone around them. Orlando seems to have some kind of magic in their essence, for they are “the adored of many women and some men.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 79). Their physical appearance also seem to have some influence in that, as “a more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 2). In the passage below, the biographer gives an interesting account about the effect Orlando had upon people:

It was not necessary that they should speak to him or even that they should see him; they conjured up before them especially when the scenery was romantic, or the sun was setting, the figure of a noble gentleman in silk stockings. Upon the poor and uneducated, he had the same power as upon the rich. Shepherds, gipsies, donkey drivers, still sing songs about the English Lord ‘who dropped his emeralds in the well’, which undoubtedly refer to Orlando, who once, it seems, tore his jewels from him in a moment of rage or intoxication and flung them in a fountain; whence they were fished by a page boy. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 79).

This extract indicates the variety of people Orlando met and pleased. Their charisma was undeniable. Orlando is able to establish courtly relations to people from different spheres of society. Observing this trait in Orlando, it is possible to assume that there is multiplicity in the character. Still as a young man, there were times in Orlando’s life when he would disguise to walk among those from a different social class than his:

Hence, he began going frequently to Wapping Old Stairs and the beer gardens at night, wrapped in a grey cloak to hide the star at his neck and the garter at his knee. There, with a mug before him, among the sanded alleys and bowling greens and all the simple architecture of such places, he listened to sailors' stories of hardship and horror and cruelty on the Spanish main; how some had lost their toes, others their noses – for the spoken story was never so rounded or so finely coloured as the written. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 12).

These episodes allowed Orlando to expand his perspective. Although Orlando belongs to the nobility, he would also learn from sailors and locals' experiences. Beyond, his disguise also helps him to distance himself from his usual self. Thus, he does not need to follow conventions and noble patterns, so he adopts a different behavior from what is socially expected. However, Anastácio (2006) asserts that Orlando embraces different aspects in different centuries and highlights that there is some kind of continuity in Orlando's essence. Therefore, Orlando has the ability to walk among both lower and higher layers of society, adapting himself to different situations, but it happens in a way he keeps true to his essence. There are other moments in the narrative where this trait is intensely exposed and can be understood more clearly. They mostly appear after Orlando undergoes the sex change – from male to female –, which happens during a period where he is sent to Constantinople, as an ambassador. There, Orlando lives some adventures in a period full of sprees. One morning he is found in his room, in a trance, unable to be awakened. Seven days go by and Orlando, who was still sleeping, is visited by three figures: Lady of Purity, Lady of Chastity and Lady of Modesty. Here comes the moment which precedes his sex change. The first to enter his place, Lady of Purity claims:

I am the guardian of the sleeping fawn; the snow is dear to me; and the moon rising; and the silver sea. With my robes I cover the speckled hen's eggs and the brindled sea shell; I cover vice and poverty. On all things frail or dark or doubtful, my veil descends. Wherefore, speak not, reveal not. Spare, O spare! (WOOLF, 2014, p. 86).

Through the excerpt “on all things frail or dark or doubtful, my veil descends”, one can understand that there was something to be revealed. Subsequently, Lady of Chastity says:

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I am she whose touch freezes and whose glance turns to stone. I have stayed the star in its dancing, and the wave as it falls. The highest Alps are my dwelling place; and when I walk, the lightnings flash in my hair; where my eyes fall, they kill. Rather than let Orlando wake, I will freeze him to the bone. Spare, O spare! (WOOLF, 2014, p. 86).

Here, in the excerpt “where my eyes fall, they kill” one may think that Lady of Chastity is killing Orlando. In other words, she may be killing something in who Orlando used to be in order for a new person ascend. Then, comes the third and last one, Lady of Modesty. She speaks:

I am she that men call Modesty. Virgin I am and ever shall be. Not for me the fruitful fields and the fertile vineyard. Increase is odious to me; and when the apples burgeon or the flocks breed, I run, I run; I let my mantle fall. My hair covers my eyes. I do not see. Spare, O spare! [...] ‘Truth come not out from your horrid den. Hide deeper, fearful Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone; you unveil the shameful; the dark you make clear, Hide! Hide! Hide! (WOOLF, 2014, p. 86-87).

As Lady of Modesty evokes “Truth”, something fantastic takes place and Orlando finally wakes up. Truth now seems to be revealed. The extract below describes how it happened:

We are, therefore, now left entirely alone in the room with the sleeping Orlando and the trumpeters. The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast:—THE TRUTH! at which Orlando woke. He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 88).

This is the moment when things start taking a different track. Since this research accepts the information given by the biographer as real, Orlando’s sex change is read as something natural. There are many different ways of reading this event, though. One may read it as a metaphor or as a fantastic happening. As mentioned before, there are many moments in which the adaptable quality of Orlando is exposed. Living then, as woman, Orlando enhances her abilities of adapting herself, sometimes alternating her gender. In an episode, Orlando, wearing man’s outfit walks around Leicester Square and meets a woman. Orlando, then, “swept her hat off to her in the manner of a gallant paying his addresses

to a lady of fashion in a public place”, bending herself to the masculine force inside her (WOOLF, 2014, p. 143). The woman responds positively when she looks up at him “(for a man he was to her) appealing, hoping, trembling, fearing. She rose; she accepted his arm. [...] She led Orlando to the room in Gerrard Street which was her lodging.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 143). Inside, “roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man. She looked, she felt, she talked like one.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 143). On the other hand, she had been “so lately a woman herself” that “she suspected that the girl’s timidity and her hesitating answers and the very fumbling with the key in the latch and the fold of her cloak and the drop of her wrist were all put on to gratify her masculinity” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 143). Orlando and the woman go upstairs. Then Orlando starts reflecting about the situation she finds herself in. She does not enjoy being in an untrue situation where “the pains which the poor creature had been at to decorate her room and hide the fact that she had no other” did not deceive her (WOOLF, 2014, p. 143). She feels pity and deception towards the woman, “so that she did not know whether to laugh or to cry.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 144). And when everything is ready for the action to take place, Orlando cannot bear the situation “in the strangest torment of anger, merriment, and pity she flung off all disguise and admitted herself a woman.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 144). Consequently, the woman intensely laughs.

This episode discloses Orlando’s shifting ability concerning gender. As she cross-dresses as a man, she recalls the feelings of her previous experiences as male. However, the fact that she is dressed as the other sex will not be enough to tie her up to only one gender. Melita (2013, p. 131) points out that Orlando “does not need to cross-dress or prove her masculinity or femininity, because she truly exists as the other gender.” Orlando, as a character, represents the free-floating, non-static artifices of gender. More than a gender, Orlando is a fruitful mind, who is able to detach herself from her sex and assume various performances according to what is appropriate for the moment.

She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 146).

There may be a misunderstanding about the use of the term sex in this extract. Since the debate on gender had not yet emerged at that time, it is natural that the word sex is used to refer to gender. On the other hand, there are other ways of reading it. The word sex can be metaphorically or literally read. This research believes that sex, here,

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is an equivalent to gender. Thus, here is one more evidence that Orlando develops her ability of shifting her gender. Having lived both as man and woman (and also, something in between, sometimes) Orlando acquires new learning from these experiences:

For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn. The curious of her own sex would argue, for example, if Orlando was a woman, how did she never take more than ten minutes to dress? And were not her clothes chosen rather at random, and sometimes worn rather shabby? And then they would say, still, she has none of the formality of a man, or a man’s love of power. She is excessively tender-hearted. She could not endure to see a donkey beaten or a kitten drowned. Yet again, they noted, she detested household matters, was up at dawn and out among the fields in summer before the sun had risen. No farmer knew more about the crops than she did. She could drink with the best and liked games of hazard. She rode well and drove six horses at a gallop over London Bridge. Yet again, though bold and active as a man, it was remarked that the sight of another in danger brought on the most womanly palpitations. She would burst into tears on slight provocation. She was unversed in geography, found mathematics intolerable, and held some caprices which are more common among women than men, as for instance that to travel south is to travel downhill. Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 124-125).

The passage above allows one to realize how much Orlando had learned from these experiences. Not only because she had faced life both as man or woman. But because she has lived through about 400 years. Melita (2013, p. 131) states that Orlando “uses what she learned as a man living in the 16th and 17th centuries to help her become a stronger woman in the centuries that follow.” Hence, she has abilities that, at that time, were considered uncommon for women. As described in the excerpt, Orlando is good at growing crops and riding horses. On the other hand, she is “excessively tender-hearted” and would not bear to see cruelty happen to animals. The chapter “On androgyny” discusses how such abilities can be considered recurrent things in male or female’s lives. Basically, Sandra Bem’s researches (1976) show that there are tasks that are socially constructed to be performed by men, while others were created to be accomplished by women. The individual who is able to perform multiple tasks, not being restricted about his sex, might be androgynous. Surely, there are also physical features that classify one as androgynous, as explained in the next chapter. In the long run, Orlando represents this adaptable being, whose behavior is unfixed. Orlando’s gender shifts, and so it happens to her beloved ones.



## Gender in Orlando's Lovers

Being so charming and enchanting, lively Orlando experiences love many times during his life. Although Orlando was desired and adored by numerous people, the biographer points up only two lovers as remarkable ones: Sasha and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. Orlando meets Sasha during The Great Frost, which was a period of extreme cold winter. At that time, Orlando had not passed through the sex change yet, thus he was still a man. When Orlando sees Sasha “coming from the pavilion of the Muscovite Embassy”, she is a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 17). Mystified, Orlando instantly starts to fall in love with Sasha:

The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind. When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be – no woman could skate with such speed and vigour – swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question. But the skater came closer. Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea. Finally, coming to a stop and sweeping a curtsy with the utmost grace to the King, who was shuffling past on the arm of some Lord-in-waiting, the unknown skater came to a standstill. She was not a handbreadth off. She was a woman. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 17-18).

Clothing, once more, is used in the novel as an artifice to disguise someone's sex. For it can attenuate the shape of someone's body. After Orlando's sex change, this resource is still given its importance. “Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 123). Sasha, moreover, is described as slender. Bem (1975) highlights that androgynous people are usually very thin, since curves are associated with female bodies while muscles are associated to male bodies. Accordingly, binary concepts of gender are not enough to define Sasha. Similarly to Orlando, she is also depicted as androgynous. Orlando and Sasha have a short-lived affair and, as informed by

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the biographer, Orlando is totally heartbroken when it is over. Still after the sex change, Orlando keeps her feelings for Sasha, which caused her confusion.

And as all Orlando’s loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man. For now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 105).

The passage above illustrates the effects social impositions have in one’s behavior. One suffers a sex change, but one’s feelings towards people do not change along. The message expressed is: love has no gender. One’s sex, that is, a body condition, does not alter how one feels on the inside. One’s sex might be determinant in one’s experiences in the world. These experiences might affect how one feels. Orlando’s new condition increases her questionings about the world and enriches her existence. Living as a man as well as living as a woman allowed Orlando the freedom to disconnect herself from social constructions. Orlando is not genderless. Orlando is both man and woman. She alternates between masculine and feminine forces, which complement each other. Sometimes, she balances these two forces inside her, being able to detach herself from limitations, thus reaching androgyny. Whether Sasha has the same shifts of gender as Orlando there is not enough evidence. On the other hand, the same cannot be said about Shelmerdine. Living as a woman in the Victorian period, Orlando starts feeling the pressure to find a husband. As she walks out the door of her house, she meets Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. “And then, in the space of three seconds and a half, everything had changed – she had broken her ankle, fallen in love, married Shelmerdine.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 177). Even though they instantly get married, as they are influenced by the period in which they are living, the connection between the couple seems natural and fluid.

Though their acquaintance had been so short, they had guessed, as always happens between lovers, everything of any importance about each other in two seconds at the utmost, and it now remained only to fill in such unimportant details as what they were called; where they lived; and whether they were beggars or people of substance. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 168).

Although things happened very fast, it seems Orlando and Shelmerdine have a singular bond, where one perfectly fits each other. In a conversation they assume “*You’re a woman, Shel!*” she cried. *‘You’re a man, Orlando!’* he cried.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 168). It seems Orlando recognizes feminine features in Shelmerdine, as Shelmerdine recognizes masculine traits in Orlando. This recognition also occurs in other moments:

‘Are you positive you aren’t a man?’ he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, ‘Can it be possible you’re not a woman?’ and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once. (WOOLF, 2014, p. 172-173).

Orlando’s experiences as a man helped her to understand better both of the sexes. She realizes that there is something of man in woman and vice versa. Woolf (1929) believes that there are both feminine and masculine forces inside the individuals. Butler (1990) sees gender as free-floating and non-static. Since Woolf (1929) recognizes that one’s mind might reach different states, that it may shift and wave between the sexes, it seems both authors agree on the mutable and dynamic character of gender. Through the creation of Orlando, Woolf depicts the nature of human’s essence, emphasizing its change abilities and unfixed qualities. “Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.” (WOOLF, 2014, p. 124). Hence, clothing would be a mere artifice used to keep external appearances in the service of social conventions, while gender exists on the inside, independent upon one’s bodily sex.

## Final Thoughts

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) represents the fluidity and changeability of the human being. It is interesting to notice that in 1928 Woolf’s novel advanced questions that started being debated almost 50 years after its publication. Literature, here, – as it often does – exposes features of human behavior that are still sometimes silenced. Orlando is a fictional character inspired in real people. He experiences both masculinity and femininity, thus acquiring a greater amount of knowledge than those who do not. Because of all the distinct events Orlando undergoes, he learns to use the best of each sex. It enables him to see the world from different perspectives. He experiences what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman. Besides, he freely shifts gender according to the appropriateness

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of the moment. His adaptability enables him to walk among different spheres in society, embodying different personas. As a consequence, he broadens his experience, fact that later furnishes content to his writing. Orlando is a literary illustration of the performances Judith Butler discusses in *Gender Trouble* (1990). He is a representation of an individual to whom concepts of binary gender are not applicable. Orlando’s gender is free-floating, dynamic and non-static. In other words, it varies.

Orlando, the protagonist, is always depicted as someone gifted and charming, with special aptitude for writing. His flexibility, a consequence of androgyny, allows him to walk into and out of new situations. Orlando seems not to have difficulty in shifting his gender, he does so whenever he pleases. He benefits from this situation by having a wider range of experience than his sex-typed acquaintances, and that helps him to better understand both sexes. Also, as a woman, Orlando is more likely to detach herself from gender stereotypes, for she has previously lived as a man. Hence, this remarkable feature in Orlando might help him not only as an individual, but also as a writer. For through the duality of his existence, he has enlarged his view of the world.

When Woolf discusses geniality, in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), she proposes it is related to androgyny. She recalls Coleridge’s statement that “a great mind must be androgynous.” (COLERIDGE, 2005, online). Then she develops the idea that “it is when this fusion (between masculine and feminine) takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties.” (WOOLF, 2004, p. 113-114). Balancing Orlando both masculine and feminine forces in his essence, Orlando reaches the most suitable state of mind for one to create a work of art. It is after he experiences life both as man and as woman that he finally feels prepared to finish the poem he has been working on through centuries, “The Oak Tree”. It is through this poem that Orlando finally achieves literary success and is praised by critics. Nick Greene, his contemporaneous fellow, who is also a writer, does not suffer a sex change during the novel. Neither does he seem to wave his gender. Hence, Greene fits the standard behavior approved by society. Moreover, it is interesting to observe that Nick Greene, who is fixed to his gender, does not achieve the same success as Orlando does. Through the analysis of Woolf’s *Orlando*, we can explore not only the instability of human essence, but also the features of a genius.

Another interesting thing to observe is the changes in Orlando: a writer as a man, and later a writer as a woman. During his lifetime as a man, Orlando never asks if writing is suitable for him. As a (married) woman, however, Orlando stops her writing to think of possible consequences this might bring upon her. She also questions whether this activity, which she loves so much, is something allowed for a woman. The contrast in these situations is huge. Orlando, a nobleman, explores all the possibilities in his life. There is

no dream he cannot chase or achieve, for he has health, beauty, money and nobility. The only dreamy ambition he cannot realize is love, through a committed relationship with Sasha, because that is something that does not depend exclusively on him. Moreover, Orlando, as a man, feels comfortable to write at any place, any time, in front of anyone. He does not seem bothered by external conditions. He writes while he is contact with nature, sitting on the grass. He also writes in open rooms. He writes when he is traveling to exotic places. The same does not occur in his existence as a woman. Why? Because women, as Woolf recalls (1929), were still censured for producing literature at the time portrayed in the novel. Women had to face the phantom of the Angel in the House, which Orlando, after experiencing both sides of the coin, is able to ignore. But, first, Orlando had to detach herself from the social impositions upon gender. It is just then, when she balances both masculine and feminine forces, that she reaches androgyny, being able to finally complete her poem.

On the other hand, many of the struggles women had while working to improve their writing have become attenuated as time went by. Thanks to Feminism and other social movements, which are becoming each day more popular in Western society, a higher number of women are claiming their right to speech and action. Women are raising their voices and expressing their will. It is still a challenge for women to freely expose their body experiences, though. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf vindicates physical and literary space for women. Even though women still have to struggle to afford their space, I believe they are receiving more opportunities to be read and heard. I agree with Woolf (2015) that the biggest challenge for women's writers is to tell the truth about the experiences of the body. In many circumstances, women are still more haunted than men by what others might possibly think, or by what society might say. Women are still judged by exploring their sexuality. Although this is something that many have previously talked about, it is definitely an issue to be further discussed.

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